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SUBJECT: GREECE: Renewable Energy a Top Priority for New Environment
Minister Birbili; Natural Gas Also Key for Energy Mix

Renewable Energy the Wave of the Future

¶1. In a January 19 courtesy call ambassador paid on new Minister for Environment, Energy, and Climate Change Tina Birbili, Birbili underscored Greece's desire to increase renewable energy (solar and wind) production in the country's energy mix. She spoke passionately of her efforts to introduce new legislation (currently in the first reading in Parliament) that would reduce the licensing and permitting process from about five years to one. Moreover, she added, the streamlined procedures would help increase transparency, reduce bureaucracy, and root out corruption and unethical business practices, which plagued the old system.

¶2. Birbili raised her meeting with Department of Energy Undersecretary Kristina Johnson on the margins of the Copenhagen Climate Change summit, reiterating her strong desire to visit the U.S. National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) in Golden, CO. The ambassador encouraged greater U.S.-Greek cooperation on renewable energy and offered to assist making the NREL trip a reality.

¶3. Birbili mentioned her plans for two renewable projects (one each wind and solar) offshore in the Aegean, where she claimed the government would not face traditional opposition for "visual pollution" from local citizens. Despite the EU Natura 2000 directive, which provides for nature conservancy areas, Birbili was confident that Greek public awareness was sufficiently mature to accept more wind and solar farms.

¶4. The ambassador raised the Obama Administration's efforts on energy efficiency and conservation as something Greece could emulate. Birbili said the new, Greek government had identified conservation and efficiency projects in the public sector as priorities; however, there were insufficient funds to tackle these at the moment.

Greece Lacks a Comprehensive Energy Strategy

¶5. Turning to broader energy issues, Birbili bemoaned the fact that there had not been a long-term national energy plan, which she hoped to rectify. She hoped to have a national strategy in place by the end of 2010, addressing Greece's 20-20-20 EU climate change commitment. This would entail increasing current levels of renewable energy by 20%, increasing efficiency by 20%, and reducing CO2 emissions by 20%. On conventional energy, Birbili briefed the ambassador on Greece's plan to construct new lignite coal power plants to replace the heavily-polluting ones. Greece has no plan to add more lignite to its energy mix; however, Birbili said that the cost efficiency of lignite and its local availability made it an integral part of the country's energy security strategy, which she could not foresee changing.

. But Natural Gas an Integral Part of the Mix

¶16. Birbili said that Greece is seeking to increase its use of natural gas, which (because of the international pipelines) is considered a geopolitical issue handled by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Spyros Kouvelis. Since November, Kouvelis has made trips to Baku, Azerbaijan, and to Doha, Qatar, in pursuit of Greece's energy security. Even Prime Minister Papandreou, who is expected to make an official visit to Moscow in mid-February, is involved, Birbili stated. She explained that Greece is working with Italy to complete feasibility studies for the sub-Adriatic pipeline of the Interconnector Turkey Greece Italy (ITGI), bridging Greek and Italian markets. Birbili said that the linchpin to ITGI's completion and success is the long-stalled gas transit and pricing agreement between Turkey and Azerbaijan, which would allow greater gas volumes to flow from the Caspian basin. When asked by the ambassador about Greece's Russian gas contracts, Birbili responded that the agreement ends in 2016 but offered no additional insights into how or when Greece might renegotiate. Greek media is speculating that Papandreou's upcoming trip to Russia will include energy discussions.

And, Oil Still in Play

¶17. On the Burgas-Alexandroupolis (B-A) oil pipeline, Birbili said that Greece is following closely recent announcements by Russia and Turkey on the alternative Samsun-Ceyhan route for Russian oil. Acknowledging Samsun-Ceyhan competes with B-A, Birbili dismissed Greek dependence on B-A, saying it was only a small piece of the national energy puzzle.

"We Got Nothing" at Copenhagen

¶18. Birbili was strident in her criticism at the lack of progress at Copenhagen, dismissing the accord as neither binding nor a political agreement (reftel). However, she conceded that President Obama's presence was critical to the little progress made. Birbili hoped that Mexico would offer a better opportunity to create a real agreement. The ambassador countered that Copenhagen was a good start, that funding commitments were made to alleviate dislocation of the least developed economies, and that mitigation targets were forthcoming from major economies.

Helping Greece Tackle Forest Fires to Reduce Global Warming

¶19. The ambassador described for Birbili ongoing U.S. efforts to assist Greece in fighting devastating annual forest fires, citing the more than \$2 million USAID/OFDA money appropriated in 2007, which U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and FEMA are using to conduct training and provide technical assistance. The ambassador shared a recent USFS assessment of Greece's fire service, highlighting one of the conclusions recommending that Greece focus more on fire prevention. Birbili was greatly appreciative of U.S. assistance and admitted that the Greek Forest Service was weak, but she hoped to rectify that.

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